



How Committed to God and Church are Americans?

Four out of five adults in the United States consider themselves to be Christian. How committed are they to the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith? According to the Barna Research Group, it depends on how you measure commitment. “For most Americans, being a Christian is more about image than action.”

Based on nationwide surveys conducted in 2005, the Barna Research Group explored eight different measures of people’s commitment to their faith and found that the outcomes ranged from a low of 16% (the highest priority in their life was their faith) to a high of 72% (72% answered “yes” to the following question: “Have you ever made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in your life today?”) Some of the interesting findings included:

- Women were more likely than men to express a higher level of commitment to the Christian faith for all eight of the factors studied.
- Adults who were 40 or younger – i.e., those in the Baby Bust or Mosaic generations – were less likely than older adults to indicate commitment to their faith in relation to each of the eight measures.
- While 71% said religious faith was important in their life today and 60% said they would describe themselves as deeply spiritual, only 29% has attended a church service, prayed to God and read from the Bible in the past week.

Out of more than sixty subgroups studied in this research, evangelical Christians were the top-ranked people group for each of the eight measures of faith commitment. The most dramatic differences were found in relation to making their faith the highest priority in their life (55% of evangelicals claimed to do so, versus 16% of the

population at-large) and demonstrating an active faith (73% had attended church, read the Bible and prayed during the preceding week, compared to 29% nationally).

“Evangelicals” are a subset of born again Christians in Barna surveys. In addition to meeting the born again criteria, in which people say they have made “a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today” and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, evangelicals also meet seven other conditions. Those include:

1. saying their faith is very important in their life today;
2. contending that they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians;
3. stating that Satan exists;
4. maintaining that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works;
5. asserting that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth;
6. saying that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches;
7. and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as “evangelical.” Being classified as “evangelical” is not dependent upon any church or denominational affiliation or involvement. Evangelicals represent 7% of the adult population.

Church Attendance and the Unchurched

Nearly half of the adult population in America attends religious services in a typical week, but fewer than one out of every five firmly believes that a church is a critical element in their spiritual growth. Only 17% of adults said that “a person’s faith is meant to be developed mainly by involvement in a local church.” An equally small number of adults (18%) firmly embraced the idea that spiritual maturity requires involvement in a community of faith. Even the most devoted church-going groups seemed to dismiss the notion: only one-third of all evangelicals and one out of five non-evangelical born again adults endorsed the idea that a church is a critical element in

their spiritual growth. Only one out of every four adults who possesses a biblical worldview (25%) agreed with the significance of a local church in a person's spiritual growth.

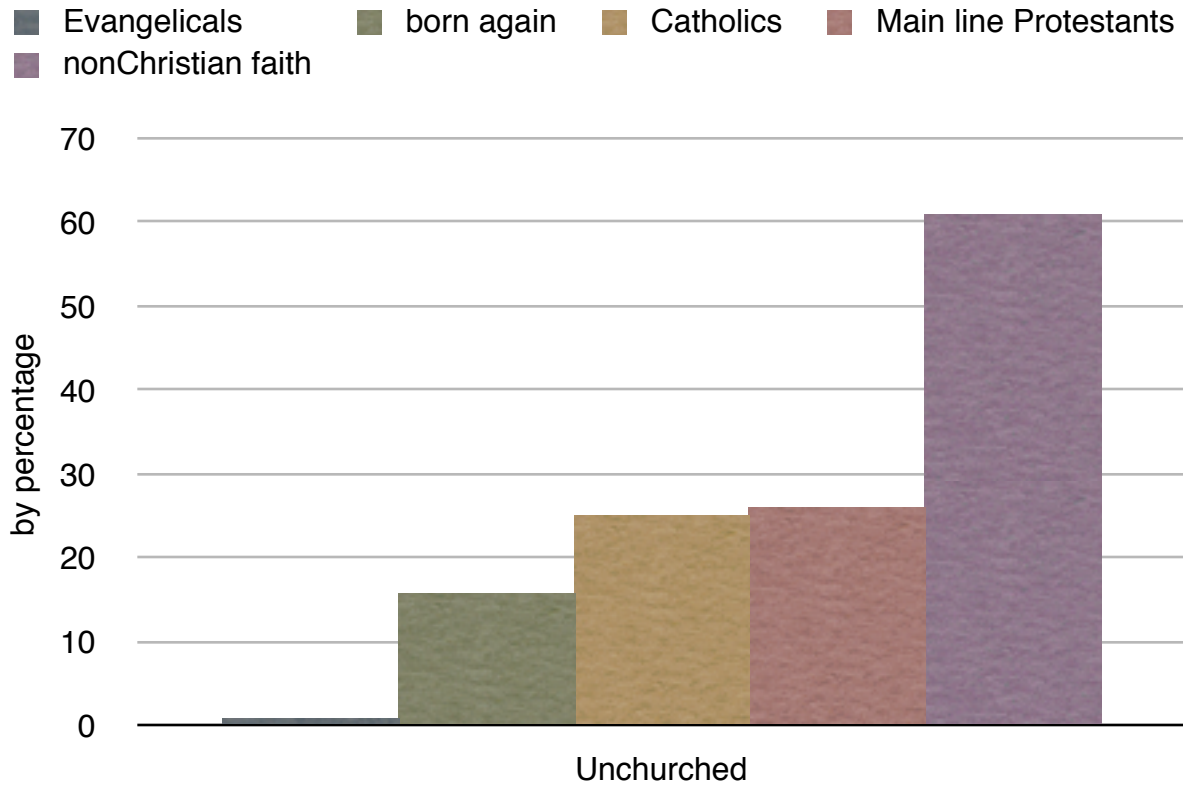
A survey by the Barna Group indicated that "if the unchurched population of the United States were a nation of its own, that group would be the eleventh most populated nation on earth." Included in this estimate are 13 to 15 million "born again" adults and children. The survey, which was completed in January of 2007, reveals that 33% of adult Americans are "unchurched", meaning they have not attended a religious service in the past six months. While the overall number of unchurched Americans may seem alarming, the percentage of the unchurched population has remained stable since 1994.

Demographically, there are some clear differences. Political liberals (47%) are more likely to be unchurched than political conservatives (19%). Residents of the West (42%) and Northeast (39%) were more likely to have avoided church in the last six months than residents of the South (26%). Homosexuals (49% were unchurched) were less likely to have attended church than heterosexuals (31% were unchurched).

There were some interesting patterns within the religious backgrounds reported by the survey participants as well. "[P]eople aligned with a faith other than Christianity are two-and-a-half times as likely as self-designated Christians to be unchurched (61% versus 24%, respectively)." Catholics (25%) are more likely than Protestants (20%) to be unchurched. People who attend a mainline Protestant church were nearly twice as likely as those who attend non-mainline Protestant congregations to be unchurched (26% versus 16%, respectively).

Evangelical believers were the most reliable church goers, with just 1% being unchurched. Born again Christians who were not evangelical also had a better than average record of church attendance; only 16% were unchurched. However, adults who call themselves Christian but are not born again were by far the least reliable church (32% were unchurched). See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Unchurched by Faith Commitment



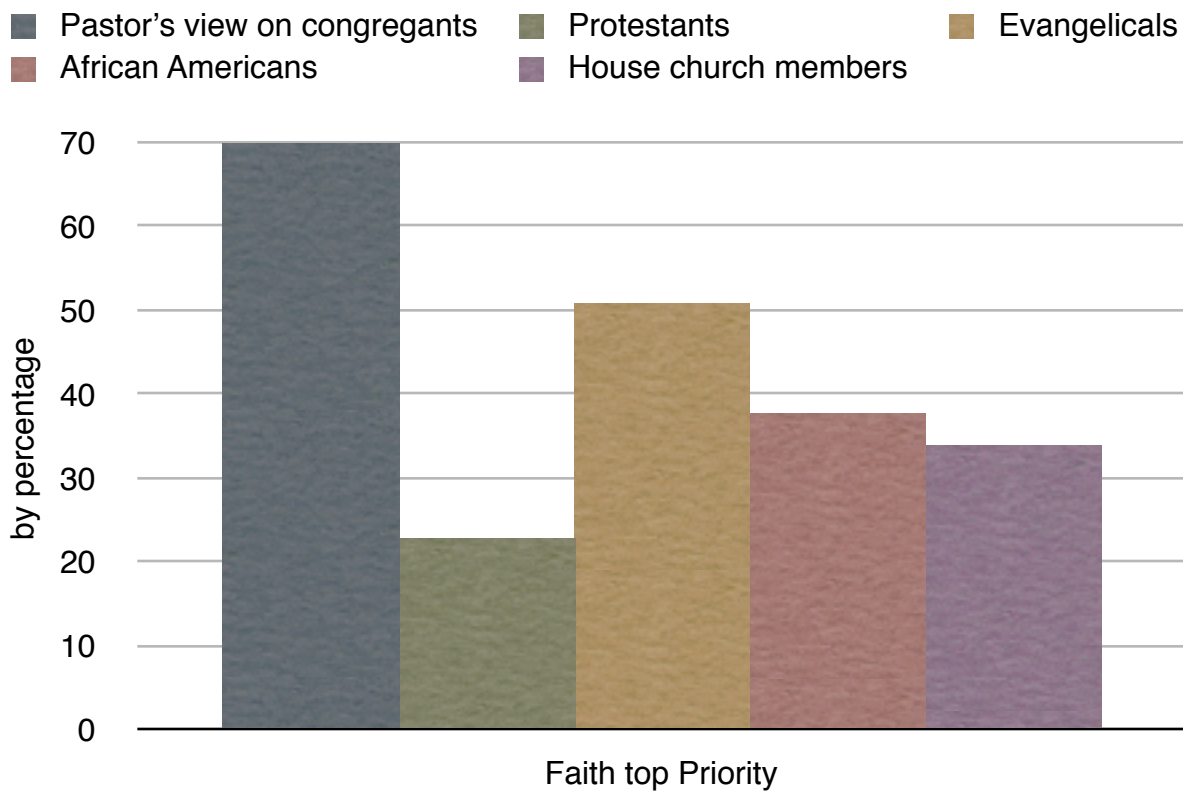
Pastors Believe All Is Well; but Adults Are Lukewarm About God

Two Barna Group surveys indicate that pastors believe the people who attend their churches are deeply committed to God, while the people themselves deny it! Based on interviews with a sample of 627 Protestant pastors, the Barna study discovered that pastors believe that 70% of the adults in their church consider their personal faith in God to transcend all other priorities. Amazingly, as many as one out of every six pastors (16%) contends that 90% or more of the adults in their church hold their relationship with God as their top life priority!

In contrast to the upbeat pastoral view of people’s faith, a nationally representative sample of 1002 adults was asked the same question – i.e., to identify their top priority in life – and a very different perspective emerged. Only one out of every seven adults (15%) placed their faith in God at the top of their priority list. To make an apples-to-

apples comparison, the survey isolated those who attend Protestant churches and found that even among that segment of adults, not quite one out of every four (23%) named their faith in God as their top priority in life. Once again there is a significant difference for those whose religious beliefs characterize themselves as “evangelical.” Among evangelicals, 51% said their faith in God was their highest priority. Other populations with a higher reported priority for faith were African Americans (38%) and adults who attend a house church (34%). But none of them approached their pastors’ perceived commitment level. See Figure 2 below.

Figure 2
Faith as the Top Life Priority



Most Americans seem to like the security and the identity of the label ‘Christian’ but resist the biblical responsibilities that are associated with that identification. “There has never been a time,” said George Barna, “when American society was in more dire need of the Christian Church to provide a pathway to a better future. Given the voluminous

stream of moral challenges, and the rampant spiritual hunger that defines our culture today, this should be the heyday for biblical ministry. As things stand now, we have become content with placating sinners and filling auditoriums as the marks of spiritual health.”

For further information on the topics in this essay, see the following articles on the Barna website.

[“Americans Have Commitment Issues, New Survey Shows”](#); April 18, 2006.

[“Commitment to Christianity Depends On How It Is Measured,”](#) November 8, 2005.

[“Surveys Show Pastors Claim Congregants Are Deeply Committed to God But Congregants Deny It!”](#) January 10, 2006.

[“Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million in the U.S.”](#) March 19, 2007.